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Multicultural Competence as a Teacher's Metacognition to Achieve a Positive School Climate

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Abstract: Our modern times are marked by socio-economic and cultural processes whose effects are rapidly crossing national borders and creating a global community for which multiculturalism is no longer just a concept but a social reality. As a key tool for its harmonization, intercultural education is determined, which provides conditions for interaction between cultures and prepares multicultural individuals. There is a need for the teacher to acquire the appropriate intercultural readiness and competence to enable her to posit the climate in the classroom. At the same time, there is a lack of research on the psychological climate in culturally mixed classrooms, characteristic of most schools today. The aim of the study is to investigate the importance of teachers' "intercultural readiness" factors for achieving a positive psychological climate in a multicultural educational environment. The research instrument synthesizes questionnaires on the classroom, on the organization of the educational environment and on the psychological climate and adapts them to the level of primary school education. The sample consisted of 95 teachers from Attica in Greece. The data were analyzed with the statistical package SPSS and one-way ANOVA was applied. The research assumption is confirmed that universities preparing pedagogical specialists are responsible for developing master's degree programs in intercultural education or courses for additional professional qualification with a focus on the formation of intercultural competence as a teacher's metacognition.

Keywords: transgressive education, multimodal educational environment, preschool age.

Introduction

In recent decades, Western societies have faced an intense immigration and refugee phenomenon, which has led to the creation of diverse societies, giving them a strong multicultural character (Parthenis and Fragoulis, 2016). In the context of the given situation, various theories were developed and new terms emerged, such as "multiculturalism", "intercultural education", "intercultural psychology", "intercultural competence", "intercultural readiness" etc.

Multiculturalism, according to Hohmann (Govaris, 2011), is the social situation that arises due to immigration, while intercultural education is the pedagogical programs that are developed, in relation to the problems created by immigration (Govaris, 2011). In other words, multiculturalism is considered a given social reality, while intercultural education is considered the "means" of creating conditions for the interaction of cultures (Parthenis and Fragoulis, 2016).

Multiculturalism is a phenomenon that has been observed for decades in Greece as well and has a strong impact on Greek education. In particular, nowadays the increase in foreign students studying in Greek schools is remarkable. At the center of interest are mainly the performance and the socialization process of foreign students (Georgoyiannis, 2009). As it turns out, multicultural education tends to be included in the educational curriculum of the majority of countries.

The purpose of intercultural education is to:

a) increase awareness of the extent to which our thoughts, values and behaviors are products of our own culture and not necessarily functional,

b) increase capacity and skill for interacting with people, who have different norms, values, ways of thinking and perspectives, and

c) increase the ability to control our behavior so that it is maximally effective in our relationships with people of different cultures (Zoniou and Haramis, 1997).

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Theoretical basis

It is established that many factors, such as social stratification, can lead to the differentiation of students' learning readiness and abilities. It is the responsibility of the school to try to compensate for any cultural and educational deficits, through the implementation of compensatory educational programs and differentiated teaching (Matsangouras, 2007). In order to cope with the given reality, teachers, as scientists but at the same time as professional educators, need not only basic professional education, but also continuous training and education within the context of the school itself. The need therefore arises for the teacher to acquire the appropriate "intercultural readiness and competence" that will enable her to cope with today's school reality.

The term "intercultural readiness" of the teacher refers to her ability to respond to the special requirements imposed by the composition of the student ethnicity and culture of a class, in which students with different linguistic and socio-cultural characteristics study. The term "intercultural competence" refers to the creation of feelings, behaviors and opinions of a person, towards the "other", through his education, and it is possible to be influenced by the knowledge of their own culture and the foreign culture respectively (Hall and Toll, 1999). Also, by the term "intercultural competence", is meant any theoretical, scientific, research and didactic knowledge of the teacher about cultures, languages, living conditions, etc. of individuals who come from different countries and are integrated into the social fabric of another country (Bobaridou-Kuneli and Georgoyiannis, 2004).

The modern social reality, characterized by fluidity, increasing trend of globalization, multiculturalism, and competition, seeks an appropriate school and pedagogical environment which is capable of contributing both to the harmonious integration of the student into society, and to the framing of practices that ensure equal opportunities for both gender, people with special educational needs and abilities, but also people with special cultural and linguistic characteristics (Markou and Parthenis, 2011).

With reference to the psychological and emotional formation of attitudes and opinions towards multicultural school environments as well as the theoretical and practical preparation of teachers for them, the above situations are found both in the Greek and foreign literature under the terms "inter-cultural competence" and "intercultural readiness" (Bobaridou-Kuneli and Georgoyiannis, 2004; Spinthourakis and Karatzia-Stavlioti, 2006; Hall and Toll, 1999). The intercultural competence and readiness of the teacher should be the goals and conditions for the correct performance of her pedagogical activities (Markou and Parthenis, 2011).

By "educational competence", we mean all the necessary knowledge that the teacher must have in order to be theoretically, scientifically, research and teaching qualified. This knowledge is acquired in the context of her education in the University Departments, but also at a later level. According to Babiniotis (1998), teaching proficiency is the certificate of teaching ability granted by a higher state body such as the Ministry of Education, to holders of certain diplomas of a specific cognitive subject and is necessary for the teaching of this subject (Babiniotis, 1998). The degree granted as a teaching certificate includes all the necessary knowledge, but also the skills required by the teaching process so that the teacher is able to cope with his educational duties (Georgoyiannis, 2009).

The term "intercultural psychology" refers to the science that investigates the degree to which the cultural identities (both at individual and group level) of mobile populations differ, since the developing individual is a product of social processes, but also the degree of differentiation of the prevailing national identity of the host country (Georgoyiannis, 2009).

In the context of the new social data, there should be a redefinition of education as it determines the cultural and intellectual capital of society. According to the views of social psychology, the perceptions that man forms about "others", about the phenomena and things around him, derive from the mental behavior of the system of values and norms of each culture (Markou and Parthenis, 2011). Through the process of socialization, the individual learns to identify similarities and differences, and to assign an emotional character to his evaluations of others. Depending on the organization of the respective social order, the "other" can be defined as a "stranger". "Foreigner" is defined as "one who is not foreseen as part of the established cultural reality and can question the self-evident elements of this reality" (Govaris, 2011: 21).

According to Simone de Beauvoir (Andreou, 2011), "The category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself", and "no community is ever defined as a unit without automatically confronting it with the Other. For the villager, everyone who does not belong to his village is "other" and suspect. For the inhabitants of one country, the inhabitants of other countries are strangers." The above position has particularly attracted the interest of the social sciences, expressing the well-known distinction between "in-groups" and "out-groups" (Andreou, 2011: 198). In the context of "in-groups", which are also called "we" groups, "social identities" are created, i.e. the perceptions of people, which make them experience the

feeling of "belonging". As "out-groups" or otherwise groups of "others", are defined those groups to which we do not belong and therefore there is no identification on our part with them. The two groups above are separated from each other by a social boundary, which can be either spatial (e.g. neighborhoods, communities, countries, etc.), or social (e.g. different ethnicity, gender, religion, class, profession etc.).

Thus, by creating a sense of "us and others" in a group, certain boundaries are automatically created within it, as well as exclusion zones, which prevent any other person from joining it, naturally causing negative feelings of competition, disgust, and enmity on the part of the members of the "outgroup" and feelings of security and solidarity within it (Andreou, 2011). The changes that take place in the modern era due to the continuous movements of the population and globalization, make it imperative that people adapt to the new social reality. They force the person's unhooking from their primordial characteristics and the acceptance of the new reality, so that the person led from the initial state of manipulation and alienation, to emancipation and autonomy. This will be achieved according to Plato's work through education (Govaris, 2011).

It is this maxim that affirms the key importance of the school age for the harmonious integration of the student in society, on the one hand, and on the other – as the sensitive period in which the awareness of the multi integration process is operationalized. The role of the teacher who accompanies and supports the adolescent in the process of self-realization stands out, as well as the expectations for competent stimulation of the transformations of the Self from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Overcoming difficulties and negative experiences arising from cultural differences at the school age stage requires psychological-pedagogical work with students based on acceptance of the whole personality, formation of pro-sociality, and cultural sensitivity by creating for students a "psychological and social space where they can be accepted with understanding and faith in their abilities" (Tasevska, Dyankova and Dermendzhieva, 2017: 1403).

That is, the opinion is confirmed that the implementation of such educational interactions exceeds the traditional professional skills of the teacher and implies the development of specific meta-pedagogical competencies in the modern teacher.

In conclusion, the formation of "multicultural personalities" is mentioned as a goal in the above context. According to this term, man/citizen is equipped with cultural capital, which has been acquired through his socialization, but on the other hand he has both the ability and readiness to adopt additional elements from different cultural contexts. Also, he becomes able to communicate effectively with people with different cultural capital (Kesidou, 2008). So also in the microcosm of the school, if students learn to live with the "other", the different, then as a rule they will in the future be able to interact successfully with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and at the macro-level of society (UNESCO, 2002). The ultimate goal of all people living in a country, regardless of cultural and linguistic origin, is to provide for the possibility of personal development and self-realization, but also ultimately the creation of a society, which will not be characterized by the phenomena of social exclusion, xenophobia, of racism, etc. With the "progressive operation of the school", it is therefore possible to pursue and achieve the reformation of society in the desired directions (Kesidou, 2008).

The psychological climate of the classroom is characterized as a key factor that affects children's school learning, contributes to their socialization through their adaptation to school and wider social life and finally ensures children's mental health. A positive climate is recognized as a key factor in successful and effective schools. It is the result of social interactions between students and between students and their teachers, and is influenced by both educational and social values (Koth, Bradshaw and Leaf, 2008). Plenty of research highlights the importance of a positive classroom climate in improving both school performance and student socialization (Brock et al, 2008).

However, the absence of research on the psychological climate of the classroom in culturally mixed classrooms, which characterize the majority of schools today, is evident.

Materials and Methods

A "closed-ended" questionnaire was used to collect the data, including various questions about demographic factors, intercultural readiness and teachers' classroom climate. The graded five-point Likert scale was chosen in most questions, while multiple-choice answers were included. The obtained data are analyzed with statistical package SPSS and one-factor analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA, one-factor ANOVA) is applied.

The research took place between May and June 2022 and results from the participation of 95 teachers who teach in General Primary Schools in various regions of Attica. Different areas of Attica

were selected to include schools with many foreign-language student populations and schools with a less multicultural student population. The different gradation of the percentage of multicultural student potential supports the research on the relevance of this element to the intercultural readiness of teachers and, by extension, to the psychological climate that prevails in these classes.

The writing of the questionnaire is based on an improvised questionnaire that was used in similar research (Sotiriou and Iordanidis, 2014), but was shaped by the bibliographic study of the present work on the intercultural readiness of teachers and the psychological climate of the classroom. Thus, the questionnaire concerned questions related to the investigation of teachers' intercultural readiness and questions related to the psychological climate of their classroom. It also included an introductory note clarifying the purpose of the research while clarifying the anonymity of the data. In addition, it was made clear that the resulting data would be used exclusively for the work and that completing the questionnaires was extremely helpful for preparing said work. The questions were demographic, i.e. they related to age and gender. At the same time, they were followed by questions related to the level of education of the teachers, their teaching experience in multicultural classes and the intercultural approach to teaching (implementation of the curriculum and education models, the approach to the "different" and development of intercultural communication).

Overall, theoretically and empirically, the questions concerned the teacher's intercultural preparedness. In the continuation of the questionnaire, the questions related to the investigation of the existence of a positive psychological climate in the classroom from the teachers' point of view.

Questions were used from a questionnaire drawn from similar research investigating the relationships between classroom climate and teacher job satisfaction. This questionnaire, as presented in the given research, is a synthesis of questions from various questionnaires.

It consists of the following:

a) my Classroom Questionnaire (Matsangouras, 1998),

b) questions from the Order and Organization scale of the Classroom Environment Scale,

c) questions from the Student Relations scale of the Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (Johnson, Stevens and Zvoch, 2007), adapted to the level of primary school classes and

d) questions formulated based on the conceptual definition of climate (Sotiriou and Iordanidis, 2014).

The contact with the participating teachers and the completion of the questionnaires was done through visits to the schools after prior consultation with the Principals, the School Counselor and the teaching staff so as not to disrupt the orderly operation of the school units. The teachers' participation was completely optional, and their participation was their only choice. The questionnaires were completed outside of their teaching hours.

Results

According to the results of the statistical analysis, most of the teachers of the sample teach in the first grade (43%), and are women (63%). Additionally, most of them are 31-40 years old (42%) and 41-50 years old (39%) and have a master degree (67%). Almost half of the sample has not attended seminars (49%), and 36% have attended intercultural education conferences, which is an important percentage (Table 1). Most of the teachers of the sample have 6-10 years' work experience in teaching and 1-5 years' work experience in teaching in multicultural classrooms (63%).

Table 1.
Participant statistics

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Male	35	36,5
Female	60	62,5
Age (M=40,73)	95	100
Educational level		
Bachelor	25	26,0
Master	64	66,7
PhD	6	6,3
Participation in continuing qualification to acquire multicultural competence		
Intercultural training seminars	14	14,6
Intercultural education conferences	34	35,8
None of the above	47	49,0

Table 2.
Distribution of responds (N/%)

	Research items	Not at all	A little bit	Enough	Very	Very much
1.	Do you use alternative teaching models adapted for multicultural environments?	7 (7,3%)	12 (12,5%)	23 (24%)	34 (35,4%)	19 (19,8%)
2.	Do you think the teaching methods you use are suitable for multicultural environments?	-	11 (11,5%)	17 (17,7%)	43 (44,8%)	24 (25%)
3.	Is it considered that you can meet your educational tasks in classes with linguistically and culturally diverse students?	5 (5,2%)	15 (15,6%)	33 (34,4%)	32 (33,3%)	10 (10,4%)
4.	Do you think you can respond satisfactorily to managing problems and conflicts with students from different cultural groups?	3 (3,1%)	21 (21,9%)	41 (42,7%)	22 (22,9%)	8 (8,3%)
5.	Do you find it useful to participate in training programs concerning multicultural classroom management issues?	6 (6,3%)	12 (12,5%)	25 (26%)	38 (39,6%)	14 (14,6%)
6.	Are the students in your class cooperative?	3 (3,1%)	18 (18,8%)	55 (57,3%)	16 (16,7%)	3 (3,1%)
7.	In this class most of the children struggle with the exercises we do and need help.	10 (10,4%)	41 (42,7%)	25 (26%)	14 (14,6%)	5 (5,2%)
8.	For children in this class, school work is difficult.	12 (12,5%)	32 (33,3%)	21 (21,9%)	26 (27,1%)	4 (4,2%)
9.	Among children in this class, children dominate conflict interactions.	5 (5,2%)	39 (40,6%)	35 (36,5%)	11 (11,5%)	5 (5,2%)
10.	In this class there is a competitive atmosphere both during the lesson and during the breaks.	11 (11,5%)	23 (24%)	36 (37,5%)	15 (15,6%)	9 (9,4%)
11.	In this class most children work well together.	4 (4,2%)	25 (26%)	36 (37,5%)	25 (26%)	5 (5,2%)
12.	In this classroom, a positive climate basically prevails.	5 (5,2%)	17 (17,7%)	45 (46,9%)	21 (21,9%)	7 (7,3%)

Table 2 reflects the summary of the data obtained by registering information on the number in absolute value (N) and in percentage (%).

Fifty six percent of the teachers use "very" or "very much" alternative teaching models adapted for a multicultural environment and 70% think that the teaching methods they use are "very" or "very much" suitable for multicultural environments. Additionally, 44% meet "very" or "very much" their educational tasks in classes with linguistically and culturally diverse students 43% answered that they can respond satisfactorily enough to managing problems and conflicts with students from different cultural groups. It is important to notice that 55% of the teachers find it "very" or "very much" useful to participate in training programs concerning multicultural classroom management issues.

As concerns the climate of the classroom, 58% of the teachers answered that their students are cooperative enough, 54% answered that their student struggle a little bit or not at all with the exercises they do, 45% answered that the children in their class fight a little bit or not at all and 38% answered that there is enough competitive atmosphere in their class.

Also, 47% answered that in their classroom there is a positive enough climate.

The data collected in the process of empirical research were statistically processed and the results of the applied analysis are presented in detail in Table 3.

Table 3.
Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
1	95	1,00	5,00	3,4421	,11946	1,16433
2	95	2,00	5,00	3,6421	,07764	,75675
3	95	1,00	5,00	3,2421	,10007	,97540
4	95	1,00	5,00	3,1158	,09798	,95498
5	95	1,00	5,00	3,4526	,11276	1,09902
6	95	1,00	5,00	2,9789	,08056	,78522
7	95	1,00	5,00	2,6105	,10613	1,03446
8	95	1,00	5,00	2,7684	,11442	1,11520
9	95	1,00	5,00	2,7053	,09568	,93255
10	95	1,00	5,00	2,8632	,11359	1,10714
11	95	1,00	5,00	3,0000	,10150	,98930
12	95	1,00	5,00	3,0947	,09822	,95732
Valid N (listwise)	95					

Discussion

In this context, experimental data are subjected to additional statistical processing, according to their specificity, scale of measurement and type of sample.

As a result of the application of one-factor analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA, one-factor ANOVA) only the statistically significant regularities for the studied variables were derived and discussed discursively. Several hypotheses have been tested sequentially, and the results discussed reflect statistically significant differences, namely:

1. A legitimate statistically significant difference was found in the responses of the men and women participating in the study regarding:

- "the use of alternative teaching models adapted for a multicultural environment" (F=83.225, p=0.000);
- "the use of teaching methods suitable for a multicultural environment" (F=58.839, p=0.000);
- "the possibility of completing educational tasks in classes with students of different linguistic and cultural diversity" (F=57.439, p=0.000);
- "satisfactory response in managing problems and conflicts with students from different cultural groups" (F=7.721, p=0.007);
- "participation in training programs concerning the problems of multicultural classroom management" (F=63.038, p=0.007);

- "cooperativeness of students in class" (F=10.221, p=0.002).

The stated finding testifies to the ability of the respondents to manage the pedagogical interaction in the multicultural educational environment. Their level of intercultural readiness is actually the result of their professional competence to adequately respond and satisfy the linguistically and culturally diverse needs of students. Therefore, the overwhelming positive responses found in the group of female teachers regarding the use of alternative teaching models adapted for a multicultural environment; teaching methods suitable for a multicultural environment; educational tasks differentiated according to the different linguistic and cultural status of the learners, reflect the intercultural sensitivity encoded in their competence profile.

Given the research assumption that multicultural competence is meta-level competence, the statistically significant difference found explains the factor weight of intercultural sensitivity as a determinant of intercultural readiness.

This is associated with the peculiarities of women's role models in traditional and modern society, as well as with the biologically determined maternal instinct. In this context, the results reveal the positive attitude of female teachers regarding the professionally stated position of managing problems and conflicts with students from different cultural groups; for participation in training programs concerning the problems of multicultural classroom management and for the application of cooperative learning as an effective pedagogical technology in a multicultural educational environment favoring a positive school climate.

No statistically significant difference was found in the perception of men and women regarding "students' difficulties with the exercises and the need for support" (F=3.224, p=0.076). The indicated finding identifies in the professional-competence profile of the respondents from both groups the presence of pedagogical responsibility in the performance of the professional role, primarily oriented to the quality of the pedagogical interaction and to a high degree of academic success of students in a multicultural educational environment.

2. Participation in seminars related to continuing qualification for the acquisition of multicultural competence directly influenced the competence of pedagogical specialists to organize an environment guaranteeing the possibility of "students working together" (F=3.191, p=0.046). The results of this item highlight the perceived need by the respondents to expand and upgrade their professional competencies in view of the specificity of pedagogical interactions in the heterogeneous classroom. The research assumption is confirmed that the intercultural readiness of the teacher and his ability to create a positive psychosocial climate in school is a consequence of active inclusion in the forms of continuing pedagogical qualification for work in a multicultural educational environment.

3. A regular relationship was established between the language training of pedagogical specialists and the "predominance of a positive climate in the classroom" (F=3.582, p=0.032). The research assumption is confirmed that the intercultural readiness of the teacher is directly dependent on his skills to implement relationships of participation, recognizing and making use of valuable funds of knowledge in culturally and linguistically differentiated communities.

4. No statistically significant difference was registered for the organization of intercultural interaction and the educational level of the pedagogical specialists. The indicated finding reveals an alarming trend that the educational qualification of the teacher does not have a factorial weight in relation to the readiness to work in a multicultural educational environment. The research assumption is confirmed that universities preparing pedagogical specialists are responsible for the development of master's degree programs in intercultural education or courses for additional professional qualification with a focus on the formation of intercultural competence as a teacher's metacognition.

Conclusions

In summary of the interpretive analysis of the key concepts of the problem and according to the results of the conducted research, the following findings are necessary:

- the degree of awareness, training and competence in matters of intercultural education of pedagogical specialists trained in Greek universities is low;
- the higher pedagogical education in Greece does not provide full academic training in the context of the needs of the multicultural educational environment and the formation of the necessary intercultural readiness of the modern teacher.

For this reason, the majority of teachers are insufficiently effective in carrying out their teaching tasks in classes with linguistically and culturally diverse students. The identified results reveal deficits in the intercultural readiness of Greek school teachers and problematize the issue of the quality of higher pedagogical education in the context of multiculturalism.

In the modern Greek school, the composition of the student population has changed and multiculturalism is now a common feature of almost every classroom. Therefore, in the face of the new multicultural reality, the school must adapt the system and teaching methods to the new data in order to effectively help foreign students. Therefore, the role of teachers is decisive for the smooth integration of students as it implements the educational policy.

For this reason, not only their intercultural competence, but also their intercultural readiness is of particular importance. The interculturally prepared teacher has the theoretical knowledge but also the ability to put into practice the principles of intercultural pedagogy in her teaching. In addition, she can handle issues related to diversity and problems arising from the coexistence and interaction of culturally diverse students with fluency.

In the management of multicultural classrooms, programs of teachers' training are essential for their competence in the relative theoretical and practical developments, provided that they contribute to their intercultural readiness (Coelho, 2007). Still, the programs of continuing education encourage collaborations and create safe environments for the growth of experimentation and innovative practices, so that all kinds of exclusions and stereotypes are diminished and the school can ensure all children have the knowledge and the dexterities they need, in order to become complete and active citizens (Bowman, 1993).

Finally, it adopts a multicultural perspective, establishes intercultural behavior in the classroom and creates a positive psychological climate away from prejudice and xenophobia for all students.

Therefore, as a priority for educational policies, the need for the principles of intercultural education to enrich all teacher training programs in universities and institutional training institutions stands out.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, G.D. and S.N.; methodology, S.N.; writing – original draft preparation, G.D. and S.N.; writing – review and editing, G.D. and S.N.; Analysis, discussion and conclusion, G.D. and S.N.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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